



## EDITORIAL

# Serving researchers, the impact factor and other conflicts of interest

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**T**wo years in office, 3,000 manuscripts down the line, a bit wiser, somewhat more strict, very much enjoying it, yet still beginning: it is time to give you our yearly reflections and projections regarding the *European Respiratory Journal*. Are we on the right track? Do clinical readers like our journal? Is the *ERJ* recruiting and publishing better science? And are we up to standard with regard to transparency of potential conflicts of interest by our authors, editors and reviewers?

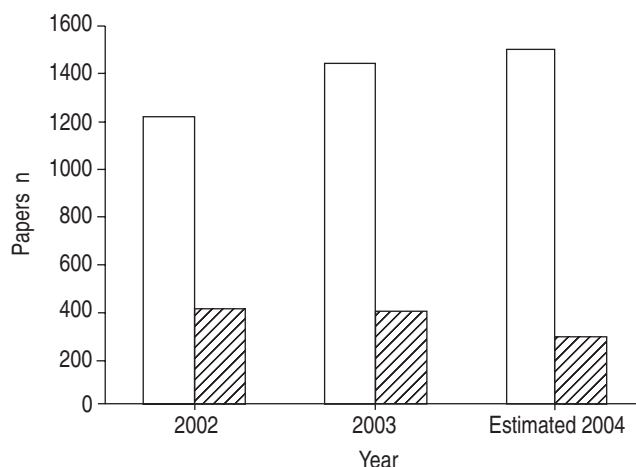
Well, for those of you reading the journal electronically, it is time to get your hard copy. How else could you fully enjoy the new cover of the *ERJ*! Linda Arnold and her crew should be proud in presenting the new look for the in- and outside of the Journal. Our sincere thanks should also go to Ganesh Raghu for his creativity and flair in providing the outstanding digital image of the lung that can be seen adorning the new front cover. It symbolises modern pulmonary medicine as one of the front-runners in the medical field. Now is the time for the *ERJ*.....!

### SERVING OUR READERSHIP

What else could be the "raison d'être" for a scientific journal than just serving scientists? Are we? At the time of writing this editorial we estimate a small growth in the annual number of submitted manuscripts from ~1,450 in 2003 to >1,500 in 2004. We have published 290 papers in 2004, which is a considerable decrease when compared to 2003 (fig. 1). First, this is due to a more critical attitude of the editorial board and, secondly, to the abolishment of *ERJ Supplements* in 2004 (which contributed 66 extra papers to our 2003 figures). We will not publish *ERJ Supplements* anymore, unless it concerns exceptional, high-standard material.

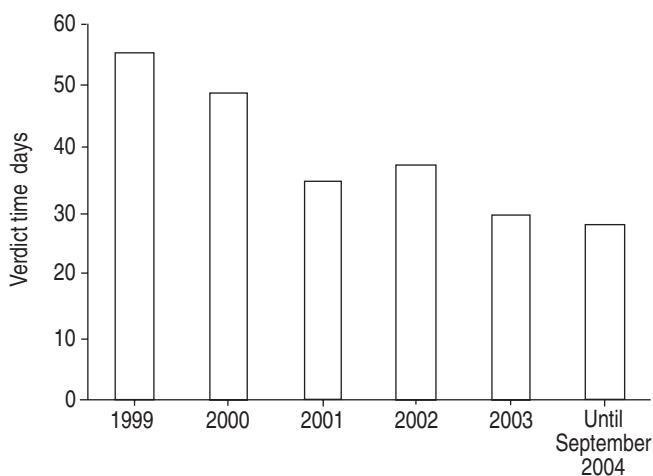
How quick will you be served? This is not unimportant in scientific publishing today. The average verdict time (between submission and first decision by the editor) has been reduced to 28 days (fig. 2). This is not bad, but still not good enough, as we have regrettable outliers. The aim of the editorial board is to reduce the verdict time by another week to 21 days in 2 years from now.

All this has led to an average acceptance rate of 22% (between August 2003 and August 2004). This is a considerable drop when the figure is compared to the calendar years 2002 (33%)



**FIGURE 1.** Total number of submitted (□) and published (▨) manuscripts in the calendar years 2002, 2003 and 2004. The figure for the total number of submitted manuscripts in 2004 is based on an estimation in November 2004.

and 2003 (27%). How did this occur? As indicated above, it is based on a more critical selection by the editorial board. Based on our reviewers' comments, the editors have to decide whether a paper has the potential to be sufficiently improved after revision. At present, we are a little less optimistic about this than previously. Of course, it remains to be established whether the current selection will be successful in terms of



**FIGURE 2.** Time between submission and first decision on acceptance, revision or rejection from 1999 until 2004.

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“usage” by our clinical readers (medical novelty) as well as scientists (citations).

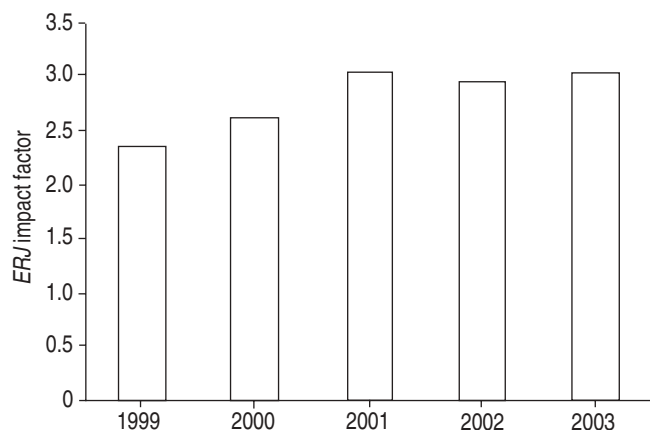
Beyond doubt, the most promising step forward in serving our members is the new electronic access of the Journal through HighWire Press ([www.erj.ersjournals.com](http://www.erj.ersjournals.com)). If you have not visited this new website, we encourage you to do so. You will be surprised by the clear and simple presentation of the Journal and all its back issues, and to be honest we are thrilled by the seemingly endless possibilities on this site to search, download and navigate through the *ERJ* and its companion journals at HighWire. For instance, you are able to get direct full-text access from *ERJ* reference lists to most quoted papers. Furthermore, we will use the system for electronic pre-publication of accepted manuscripts pending their publication in print. During the coming year we will fine-tune the site and, if you wish us to include special features, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Has it worked? Obviously, yes! Our online hits have increased 50-fold since the introduction of this new site in September 2004. This means that we suddenly reach many more clinical and scientific “customers”, thereby serving our readership better than ever before. This will strengthen the *ERJ*, since the number of online hit counts turns out to be a predictor of the number of subsequent citations [1].

### IMPACT FACTOR

How about citations? How often do researchers quote our papers? In 2003 there were 2,193 citations to *ERJ* papers that had been published during the previous 2 years. This was a 10% increase as compared to 2002. Together with the total number of papers published, these figures determine the impact factor of the Journal, which for 2003 was 2.999; we missed impact factor 3.0 by a single citation. This number essentially means that our impact factor has been stable over the past 3 years (fig. 3). Is this good news, should we worry about it or is it irrelevant anyway?

No matter how we think about it, the impact factor is the most commonly used marker of the scientific “weight” of a journal [2]. Even though it does not rate individual papers or authors, it is increasingly used for this purpose by universities and grant funding bodies [3]. It is certainly not uncommon for



**FIGURE 3.** The impact factor of the *ERJ* from 1999 to 2003.

authors to be directly or indirectly discouraged by their own academic leadership to submit papers to journals with relatively low impact factors, as job promotion can depend on it [3]. This certainly illustrates how the impact factor can be misused. In 2003, the *ERJ* ranked number nine by impact factor in the respiratory field, losing ground as compared to 2002. This essentially means that for scientists in our field there are eight journals “better” for achieving academic “esteem”, whether we agree with it or not.

This is why the editorial board has decided that the *ERJ* should offer our future authors a better-ranked forum for publication of their work. This will also feed the image of the European Respiratory Society (ERS). Our aim is to get the *ERJ* in the top four respiratory journals by 2007. There are not many ways to accomplish this goal. One is an artificial option by purposely raising self-citations, which we will never embark on. We will, however, select papers more stringently based on scientific quality. We estimate that this will lead to a stabilisation of ~290 published papers per year. If our selection turns out to be successful, we estimate that the *ERJ* will reach an impact factor >4 in 2006 (released in 2007), which was one of the goals in our mission statement. We do predict a slight drop in impact in 2004 (released 2005), because of the large number of relatively poorly quoted papers from supplements. Inevitably, it is a matter of patience, but the editorial board is fully committed to reach its long-term goal.

Is this policy conflicting with our aim to serve researchers and our clinical readers? This is an important question that was discussed during the latest ERS Council meeting in Glasgow. We sincerely believe that being selective based on quality will not be frustrating to future authors. It aims to help in raising the quality standard of respiratory science, which is in the interest of all our authors, the *ERJ* and the ERS.

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We cannot ignore the fact that the world has changed in terms of transparency, and we support that. Potential conflict of interest is an issue that has not been taken seriously by medical journals until recently [4]. There is nothing wrong with competing interests. In fact, we believe that it is a normal, daily, very human experience. However, it should be recognised above all by ourselves and, in the case of public messages, also be made transparent for others. Financial conflict of interest is common in medical science and influences reported research findings [5, 6].

That is why the ERS Publications Committee has adopted a new strategy towards conflict of interest statements. The *ERJ* will implement this policy this year, requiring a “conflicts of interest statement” from the authors of each paper, which can vary between “none declared” to listing financial relationships in terms of stocks, funding and grants. When submitting a paper, our site (<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/ERJ>) will ask authors to declare potentially competing interests by answering a number of questions. If any of these questions are answered “yes”, a statement should be drafted. We will also ask authors to consider nonfinancial conflicts of interest, such as personal rivalry.

The statement will be disclosed to the editors, not to reviewers. We will obviously not reject papers simply because of

declaration of interest. But we do believe that any competing interests should be acknowledged and openly stated at the time of publication, by printing it alongside the article.

#### **ERJ TEAM**

Well, the *ERJ* is a team with many players! That is why we enjoy our editorship. Head and tail is the Publication Office in Sheffield, which is a decisive factor in the quality standard of the Journal. The management of Linda's team, the reliable administrative handling and, last but not least, the top-class technical editing are all indispensable. Our Editorial Board members have again worked very hard to handle the 1,450 papers this year and have shown themselves to be of outstanding quality. We regret that Erica von Mutius and Ed Silverman had to resign and thank them for their excellent input into the *ERJ*. On the other hand, we welcome Leo Fabbri as a new member of the Board and look forward to working with him. Thus, the *ERJ* will not be perfect this year, but certainly better!

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